

Muslims in US Prisons: People, Policy, Practice

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As highlighted at various junctures in this book, there is scant, in-depth research on the burgeoning Muslim prison population in Western countries. This edited volume brings together some of the key writers in the field and is a timely contribution to the extant literature on this topic.

The volume is split into four parts; Part One consists of three chapters and attempts to 'set the scene' by exploring demographics related to the imprisonment of Muslims and by investigating different Islamic perspectives on the matters of crime, punishment and prison. Completing Part One is an interesting and engaging chapter by Muzammil Quraishi, who recalls the process and problems of doing fieldwork on Muslim prisoners as a Muslim researcher.

Part Two begins with a chapter by Kenneth L. Marcus examining anti-Muslim racism within the US prison system and the development of legislation surrounding the rights and freedoms of religious minorities within US prisons that negatively impact on Muslims in particular. The following two chapters are based on empirical studies exploring conversion to Islam and inmates' views of chaplaincy. They both offer useful exploratory insight into under-researched areas and suggest ways in which future research in these areas could be oriented.

Part Three is perhaps the most illuminating and engaging section of the book. It features five chapters and begins with a fascinating account by Irum Sheikh based on interviews she conducted with detainees in a New York

detention centre in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001. This impressive chapter documents the abuse experienced by the detainees at the hands of the security services and how they used Islam as a strategy of resistance and survival. This is followed by perhaps the most politicized chapter of the volume. Mark Hamm introduces the concept of 'Prison Islam' – a term ostensibly relating to the use of gang techniques such as coercion by Muslim inmates. 'Prison Islam' is offered by Hamm as a middle ground concept between what he identifies as the 'alarmist' (in short, the idea that prisons are hotbeds of 'Islamic extremism') and 'reassuring' (in short, that there is little to no relation between Islam and terrorism) positions taken by researchers in the literature. However, Hamm himself appears guilty of alarmist posturing. For instance, he details how his study '... was based on the assumption that prison conversions to non-Judeo-Christian religions, particularly militant forms of Islam, may serve as the basis for radicalization' (pp. 132.) This controversial statement and position is later tackled by another contributor to the volume, Amir Marvasti, who argues that with this selective approach Hamm ignores other significant groups, such as extremist Christian white-supremacists.

Following this chapter Timothy Hiller offers his own variation of the 'Prison Islam' concept, 'Prislam'. 'Prislam' is defined as combining elements of gang culture with selective interpretations from the Qur'an. Hiller is successful in strongly critiquing the 'alarmist' position in the literature and cogently identifies that it is this literature that appears to be most influential in policy circles. Despite this critique, however, Hiller (as with many authors within this volume), centres 'radicalization' as a key issue of concern when discussing Muslims in US prisons. Unfortunately, there is little interrogation of this concept anywhere in

this chapter or indeed in the volume, despite the increasing level of critique from academics in recent years questioning the premise of the ‘radicalization thesis’.

The chapter by Amir Marvasti is impressive in highlighting how a focus on conversions to Islam distorts the research picture by not taking into account all religious conversions. Marvasti astutely offers reasons as to why this has been the case, such as academics chasing grants with pre-defined, narrow parameters which are in line with accepted thinking among policymakers. The final chapter in Part Three is by David P. Forsythe who using a historical analysis argues that the abuse of Muslim detainees by US forces since 2001 has little to do with religious or cultural identity and is instead based on power and the search for ‘actionable intelligence’.

The conclusion in Part Four by editor Nawal H. Ammar offers a useful summary of current barriers to researching Muslims within US prisons and suggests future avenues of research. This volume is impressive in bringing together a number of interesting chapters on a little-researched topic. However, as with much research today on Muslims in the realm of criminal justice and social policy, the concept of ‘radicalization’ is central to this book. It is yet to be seen if Muslims within and outside prison can be understood by social scientists outside the themes of violence and extremism.

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